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In 2015, an exhibition of nudes from The Canada Council Art Bank culminated in a night when visitors could pay to wander the show in their birthday suits. Michael Wilson

NOT YOUR FATHER'S MUSEUM

Kitchener-Waterloo's THEMUSEUM reinvents the museum

"Museums have to work hard to stay relevant in today's world," says David Marskell, CEO of a unique museum in Kitchener-Waterloo: THEMUSEUM. There was a time when people who wanted to find out about a certain thing, came to museums; they had to go to a museum. "Now they can Google it and get any information they want," Marskell points out. As a consequence, museums had to find ways to reinvent themselves, and THEMUSEUM has been at the forefront of that new thinking. THEMUSEUM celebrates its 15th anniversary this year, though the museum has no permanent collection. Rather, it relies on travelling exhibitions or curated shows together with the help of guest curators. "We are a unique emerging type of museum," says Marskell. "Our mission statement begins with the words 'To [illegible] the globe for fresh cultural connect.'"

Shows at THEMUSEUM have run the gamut from a display of artifacts from the Titanic to exhibits on [illegible] mechanics, Chinese [illegible], robot dinosaurs and the art of Andy Warhol, Yoko Ono and Tom Thomson. In 2015, an exhibition of nudes from The Canada Council Art Bank titled Getting Naked culminated in a single night when visitors could pay to wander the show in their birthday suits. "We had 64 people pay $20 to come here that night and go through the exhibition naked," says Marskell. "We do take risks. We're not your father's museum."

Marskell and his team have done their best to add vitality and interactivity to their exhibits. "We're in a technology-based region, so having things that are interactive is very important," Marskell says. A new MakerSpace, for example, offers tools for a range of activities, including 3D printing, sewing, carpentry and circuit building. "Most weekends, people can just show and there will be some activity they can explore," says Marskell. "We offer workshops where adults, seniors or children can explore a specific maker skill such as 3D printing or soldering." Kids, he says, love the Creation Station where they can fashion [illegible], [illegible] or magic wand, depending on the day.

Another of the museum's popular initiatives is Museum After Dark (MAD) Thursdays, which pairs visitors to THEMUSEUM with special events themed to its INTERACTION exhibition, from "toy hacking" (turning broken toys into weird and wonderful new creations) to a clothing swap. The series runs until March 29, and tickets are sold on site (no kids allowed). Then THEMUSEUM's popular Brew series, which pairs the bubbly beverage with everything from [illegible] to [illegible] and Beyoncé. Small wonder that attendance at the museum has risen steadily to almost 100,000 annually.

Still, Marskell believes that this year's exhibition, Digital Dynamics 2018 — which runs at THEMUSEUM until May 15 — may be its most innovative. It includes a display of innovative multi-media art (INTERACTION) and an exhibition of computers and video games through the ages as well as game creation and research (INTERPLAY).

In part through the unique character from Marskell and his family, the vision of THEMUSEUM came to light. After a church his parents built in [illegible] closed, Marskell approached his brother and the Trustees to shepherd the almost $1 million proceeds to THEMUSEUM. "It invigorated the board, allowing us to do this really great exhibition," says Marskell. "We wanted to invest the money wisely long-term, through an endowment fund, and also bring in an exhibition that you would normally see in New York City, Paris or Tokyo." The tech scene in Kitchener-Waterloo has brought with it a host of "young, culture-craving urbanites that we need to satisfy," says Marskell. He believes his museum, THEMUSEUM, offers him a wonderful opportunity — [illegible] — "to make sure Kitchener becomes known for [illegible] and culture as well as for tech companies."

New interactive art show blurs the line between artist and audience

Most gallery art is of the "look but don't touch" school. And rightly so, says Jane Tingley, assistant professor of hybrid media at the University of Waterloo and co-curator of a new interactive art show, appropriately called INTERACTION, now open at Kitchener-Waterloo's THEMUSEUM. "Especially when it comes to paintings, you can't touch them because the oils on your fingers will destroy the paint," she says.

But the tools we use to make art have changed. Putting together INTERACTION offered Tingley and co-curator Alain Thibault (artistic director of Montreal's annual international digital arts festival Elektra) and curatorial assistant Zana Kozomora a chance to showcase a form of art that is "new and interesting." The works in the show are intended to engage the audience's bodies as well as their minds, with playful and open-ended encounters, rich sensory experiences and immersive environments.

Walk into an installation by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, for example, and your facial features will be compared to those of 43 students who disappeared in a mass kidnapping in Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico in 2014. "The piece uses the same sort of biometric surveillance algorithms used by the police and military for facial recognition," says Tingley. "But instead of being used for surveillance, they're being used to search for the students." Since there's not much likelihood of a match, the camera runs through the students' faces in a poignant homage to the missing.

While Lozano-Hemmer's work is highly political, Perspection by Matthew Biederman and Pierre Warnecke is more playful. It synthesizes sound and images across three separate projection screens to create an experience unique to each viewer. And Jessica Thompson's Swinging Suitcase revolves around a "flock" of suitcases that generate and broadcast a chirruping flock of birds when you move them around.

All the works selected for the exhibition, which runs until May 15, "use both old and new technologies to imagine the future, explore the conceit of our technological present and critically reflect on digital culture," Tingley says. What unites them is their essential interactivity.

"They're not just responding to you as a viewer," Tingley explains. "You can participate with them and create the meaning of the work as you interact with it. They challenge that 'hands off' idea of art."

Explore all of the exhibitions at THEMUSEUM.ca.

The works in INTERACTION are intended to engage the audience's bodies as well as their minds. [illegible]

Vintage video game exhibit a blast from the past

In 1975, Bill Gates and Paul Allen got one of the first personal computer kits, the Altair 8800. They were thrilled by the idea of a computer built for the masses and proceeded to adapt BASIC (a standard programming language at the time) to make the machines easier to use. In 1975, when Gates was just 19, they released Altair BASIC and Microsoft was formed.

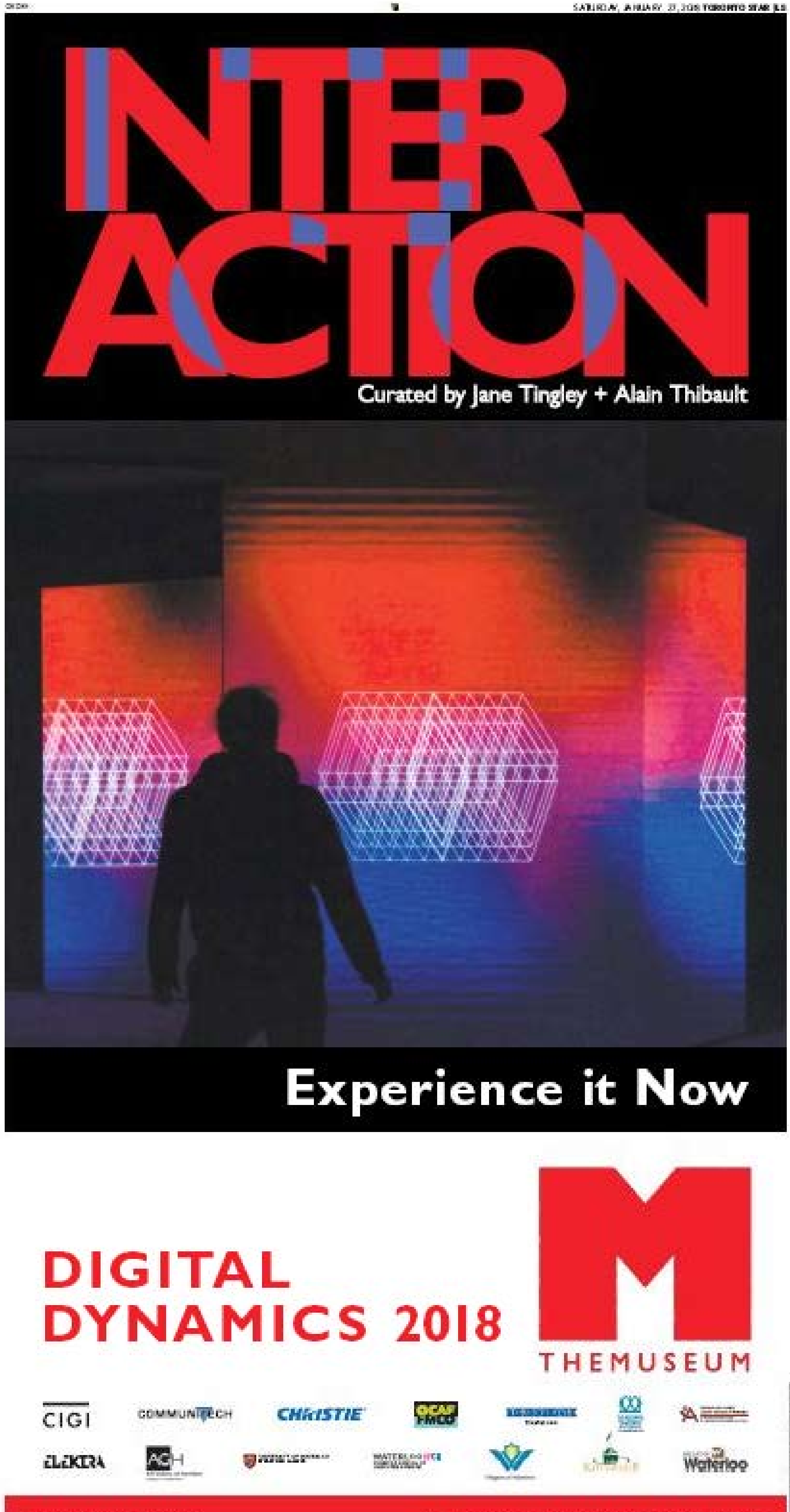
You'll find the Altair 8800, along with a display of computers and video games once regarded as revolutionary at INTERPLAY: The History of Electronic Entertainment, the interactive exhibit showing at Kitchener-Waterloo's THEMUSEUM until May 15.

Microsoft's technology bookends the display, beginning with the Altair and ending with a 2013 Xbox One. For an idea of how computing power has grown: the 1975 Altair contained about 5,000 transistors, while the Xbox One contained five billion in roughly the same physical space.

But even more compelling for some will be the opportunity to see and play vintage video games "on the ground-breaking machines of a bygone era. You can try your luck at Pong, Space Invaders and Pac-Man, for example, all on the original devices. "Almost everyone who grew up around the '70s and '80s would remember them," says Syd Bolton, curator of the exhibit at THEMUSEUM, who owns Canada's largest collection of video games (17,500 and counting). "I watched a father and son play Pong recently," he says. "The father won. That's probably the only time a parent can beat a child at a game."

Although these antique computers are ultimately "just machines," says Bolton, people often get misty-eyed rediscovering the old technology. "It's the people and their stories that I personally find more interesting than anything," he says. "It's almost like these computers are time machines because they unlock memories and bring visitors back."

There's also a second installation, called INTERPLAY: Thinking Through Games, a collaboration between Montreal's "Technoculture, Art, and Games Research Centre" (TAG) at Concordia University and the "Games Institute" (GI) at the University of Waterloo. This exhibition explores the spaces and places of games in research institutions. This unique collaboration displays a wide variety of ways that academic researchers are engaging with and studying games, through play and analysis as well as through game creation. The exhibition serves as a space for visitors of all ages to learn about how games are made and studied, showcasing research that looks into the past, present, and future of games. "The Games Institute (University of Waterloo) and the Technoculture, Art, and Games (TAG) lab (Concordia University) are proud to be able to spotlight games research in an interactive capacity to engage with the community," says Kaitlin O'Brien, communications and project coordinator for the GI. "Visitors can expect a hands-on experience that will explore games analysis, game creation and game play."

Connecting a diverse range of different games and approaches, the exhibition guides visitors through a wide array of practices, from written analytical and theoretical research, to modding and repurposing of blockbuster games like Minecraft and Fallout 4, to the creation of highly experimental alternative controller experiences. The exhibit serves as a playful invitation for visitors to reflect on and engage with possibilities outside of their preconceptions and expectations of what games research looks like. INTERPLAY: Thinking Through Games will run until May 15 as part of Digital Dynamics 2018.

INTERPLAY: The History of Electronic Entertainment, is an interactive exhibit showing at Kitchener-Waterloo's THEMUSEUM until May 15. Contributed